



POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The process of news-gathering has changed forever because of the internet and nowadays a story is just as likely to come from a weblogger as a trained journalist. Lynley Oram explains how you can be part of the action

Newspapers, television and radio news are under siege and about to be taken over by the general public. Instead of professional journalists writing stories, setting the agenda and deciding on content, it seems that the public is now in charge – at least, that's what we're being told. Type the phrase 'public journalism' into Google and you'll get thousands of worthy discourses on how it will make politicians more honest, bring relevancy back into journalism and promote democracy. This is all very high minded, but it sounds like a load of old tosh, doesn't it?

Most of these reports come from those masters of hyperbole on the other side of the Atlantic. In Britain we prefer our revolutions, like all things, to be more understated. Public journalism – also called interactive or citizen journalism – isn't so much storming the ramparts of mainstream media here as it is knocking on the door and asking politely if it can come in. And it's quite easy for you to add your voice to the wave that is helping to change the shape of the media landscape.

HERE IS THE NEWS

This isn't the first time journalism has undergone a fundamental change. It started with the invention of the telegraph, which made it possible to report almost immediately and, just as crucially accurately, on events that were happening many thousands of miles away. Then came radio, bringing the news into people's homes, making it more personal. Television brought the biggest change of all, adding moving pictures to the mix. The world had arrived in our living rooms.

The internet is just another new technology that journalists can use. Anyone can set up a web page and air their views. Mix that in with digital cameras and mobile phones with built-in cameras, and the effort and cost involved in DIY journalism is a fraction of that incurred by the print press.

There are three areas where ordinary people are getting their voices heard. You can participate in established professional news media, such as a TV news or newspaper's website. You can set up your own news website, breaking stories before

anyone else. Finally, you can keep an online journal about whatever you want.

SHARING YOUR THOUGHTS

You can put your opinion across by participating on a professional news website. The BBC interactive news site actively encourages readers to send in their comments and join in the debate on news stories. Comments are even fed through to the on-air news and emails are read out on the breakfast programme. The broadsheets do the same. You can add your comments to stories on the Guardian Newsblog, while *The Times* has its journalists run their own journals in its Weblogs section, where readers can add their comments.

Be lucky – or unlucky – enough to find yourself right next to a breaking news story such as the 7th July London bombings and you could get your story and pictures on the front pages. When the Buncefield Oil Depot spectacularly caught fire, Sky News just managed to steal the march on other news departments by actively soliciting photos and stories from viewers. The BBC wasn't far behind. Within five minutes of the first explosion, reports by witnesses were on air.

Although this sounds like a cheap way for news organisations to get stories, it could work out to be more costly. According to Richard Tait, director for the Centre of Journalism Studies at Cardiff University, "editors need more, not fewer, resources to verify and check unsolicited material complies with editorial standards". An organisation such as the BBC cannot afford to be taken in by fakes, so the interactive news department staffs a desk solely to check all photos, video clips and information sent in.

SHOW ME THE MONEY: SELLING STORIES

Public journalism can become a nice little earner, but unfortunately you have to tout your stories yourself. No agencies will sell news stories on your behalf. The closest we have in the UK is Planet Syndication (www.planetsyndication.com), an independent features agency that represents freelance journalists and photographers.

Scoopt (www.scoopt.com), Splash News and Picture Agency (<http://www.splashnews.com>), The Snitcher Desk (www.thesnitcherdesk.com) and cash4yourpics (www.cash4yourpics.com) will also help if you have photos to sell.

It's best to earn fame first online, perhaps by setting up a website that everyone wants to visit or creating a well-written blog; fortune can then often follow. Book deals are the next step. Friday Books (www.thefridayproject.co.uk/fridaybooks) is a company dedicated to publishing titles based on popular websites.

Publishing director Clare Christian has this advice for would-be writers: "The way you present your idea to the publisher is key. An email giving a short description of the blog or site, followed by an outline of the book along with other relevant information such as web stats, will always be appreciated. My least-favourite pitches have 'Look at this!' in the subject line and contain nothing but a link. Usually this just doesn't provide enough information on what the writer has in mind."



Is this the dawn of the citizen paparazzi? Scoopt is encouraging amateur snappers to send in newsworthy pictures and make some money



News-gathering behemoths such as the BBC need to get the public involved in the process or they risk losing out when stories such as the London bombings take place



That fact-checking will keep professional journalists employed for some time to come is a sentiment echoed by Craig Newmark, of Craig's List fame (www.craigslist.org). Read some reports from the US on how public journalism is taking over the mainstream media and you'll find Newmark listed as public enemy number one. His classified adverts site has been credited with causing the decline in circulation, and demise, of local newspapers in California. Newmark isn't afraid to put the boot in when it comes to traditional journalists: "Newspapers no longer speak truth to power. Newspaper chains are about profit margins. Journalists are afraid to lose access, illustrated by the entire Iraq situation. Journalists were not asking difficult questions." Newmark feels that the future will involve "a combination of professional journalists and editors working with citizen journalists. There is no substitution for fact checking and professional sub-editing," he said.

Gathering the news can become a paid gig for amateurs, too. Professional news photographers are paid considerable amounts of money for their photos, and there's no reason why you shouldn't either. If you've taken a photo or video footage that no-one else has, you could try selling it to the newspapers. If this sounds a bit daunting, you could get someone else to do it for you. British-

based Scoopt will sell your digital images for you, taking 50 per cent of whatever the image makes. But is this really viable? Kyle Macrae, founder of Scoopt, won't reveal exact numbers. "We've sold a good number of photos, as it happens, but I'm not retiring quite yet," he admitted.

Macrae is just as reticent about how much an amateur photographer could earn. "That would be strictly confidential, I'm afraid. It depends entirely on the content, and whether a paper or broadcaster wants an exclusive. There's no sliding scale as such. Get the next Kate Moss video and you can write your own cheque."

GETTING THE SCOOP

So how can someone without the resources of a news-gathering corporation get the scoop on breaking news stories? It may be that you have special access that the professionals don't. It tends to be because the story is being ignored by the mainstream press, who don't think it is newsworthy enough to bother about. But what the professionals think is or isn't newsworthy doesn't always match what the public wants to know.

Websites such as Popbitch (www.popbitch.com), dedicated to gossip about famous people, predate celebrity magazines such as *Heat* by some time. Mike Drudge gained fame and notoriety with



The Drudge Report helped break the scandal involving Monica Lewinsky and President Clinton

the Drudge Report (www.drudgereport.com) when he broke the news about President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Although scoops are now thin on the ground for Mike, people keep going back to his website for his round-up of news and stories published around the world.

KEEPING A RECORD

You can't just count on being in the right place when a world-changing moment occurs to get your name in the public journalism hall of fame. Likewise, we don't all have access to celebrities or presidents or the accounting information of multinational corporations. But we all have a story to tell and the internet is just the place to tell it. It

CREATING YOUR OWN BLOG

A blog is simply a chronological journal. Entries can contain anything you like. Some blogs round up news stories, blog journals, photos and videos from the internet. Some offer commentary and analysis of news events, while others detail the goings-on in the writer's daily life. Most blogs are a mix of all three.

If you have a website, you could create your own blog from scratch. The earliest blogs, such as Mil Millington's *Things My Girlfriend And I Have Argued About* (enter that with a .com at the end in your browser), were just that. Mil didn't even date each entry. This was Mil's gateway to fame and fortune; he's now on his third book and has a number of TV and radio credits to his name. But readers expect a bit more from blogs these days. At the very least, you'll need to have a date stamp for each one and a way for readers to post their own comments on what you've written.

There are a large number of free publishing tools that offer all this. Most will allow you

to use your own domain name or they will publish your blog for you. Two of the biggest are eblogger (www.blogger.com) and Live Journal (www.livejournal.com). We set up the Computer Shopper Blog with eblogger. If you want to do the same, enter the URL in your browser and click on the orange Create Your Blog Now arrow. Then follow the onscreen instructions. You don't need any more computer knowledge than that to get started.

If you want to check it out, our blog is located at <http://computersshopper.blogspot.com>. We found it straightforward to publish our first blog and entry, with everything self-explanatory, except how to edit the links on the left (or right, depending on the template you chose – we selected Sand Dollar). To add a link to our website, we had to go back to the publishing tool page, where we entered our first entry, and click on the Template tab. This gives you the code for everything on the blog.

The quickest way to find the bit you want to change is to press the Ctrl and F keys

simultaneously to open the Find dialog box. On the Sand Dollar template, the placeholder Edit-Me had been put under Links. So we performed a find for Edit-Me and edited the first instance with the URL for our website, and then replaced the words Edit-Me with Computer Shopper. We then deleted the second occurrence.

To encourage people to read your blog, make sure you update it regularly. People won't keep coming back to check if weeks go by between entries. Tim Worstall, author of *2005: Blogged*, offers these tips for new bloggers: "Check your spelling. But most importantly, be yourself. Or, if you're doing a satire/parody, be that character and be consistent."

Word of mouth is the best way to get your blog noticed. Read other people's blogs and post comments including your blog's URL in replies. But make sure that you are participating in the discussion. Simply posting a 'come and read my blog' message is guaranteed to turn people off.



The simpler the name you give your blog, the easier it is for people to find you. Make sure you give it a name that reflects what you're writing about



To edit parts of the blog other than your entry, go to the Template tab. Here we have decided to add a link to the Computer Shopper website



The finished product. To edit an existing entry, log on to eblogger. Go to the Posting tab and click the Edit button next to the entry



costs nothing to publish a good-looking weblog. Known more commonly as a blog, this is an online journal ordered into chronological entries about anything the author wants to say. See our Creating Your Own Blog box (below left) for details.

Although there are thousands out there, those that are well written have garnered their writers a dedicated audience, newspaper and TV coverage and book deals. Some have even made it into the mainstream media. The author of the Policeman's Blog, writing under the pseudonym of David Copperfield, can now be found writing a column for the online magazine First Post (www.thefirstpost.co.uk), alongside journalists from *The Observer*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *The Guardian*.

Blogging can make a difference. According to Tim Worstall, author of *2005: Blogged* and a political blogger himself (<http://timworstall.typepad.com/timworstall>), "the big political blogs get read by journalists. It is giving us an opportunity we didn't have before. Now people can be more vocal in disagreeing with the media."

During the Iraqi war, the public grew disenchanted and distrustful of traditional journalists, who had to be circumspect if they wanted to be allowed to report from the front line. Instead, we turned to blogs to find out what was really happening. Baghdad Burning (<http://riverbend.blog.blogspot.com>) is one example, written by a young Iraqi woman and chronicling events on the ground as well as offering intelligent and informed analysis of the politics involved. Its author, who remains anonymous for her own safety, has subsequently won reporting awards.

You don't even have to have something interesting happening in your own life to make the big time. At 110,000 page views a week, A Welsh View (<http://xo.typepad.com/blog>) by Robin Gate is one of the most widely read blogs in the UK, ranking up there with some of the big political blogs. Yet he simply lists articles and photos garnered from around the world.

As Worstall sees it, this is exactly where blogging is headed. "We [bloggers] are never going



to be running our own news. The interpretation of events is a tiny fraction of what people are using blogs for. The vast majority is using it to communicate. There will be changes. It won't be the technology of blogs that makes the changes, but what is written." **ES**

THE BEST OF BRITISH: POPULAR BLOGS

The UK is way behind the US in the blogging stakes, but we're catching up fast. To reach the top of the blogging tree in the UK, you need to get more than 100,000 hits a week, but in the US the largest blogs routinely get that every day. Still, we're getting there, and since the audience on the internet is international, in theory the sky is the limit. Provide the sort of content that appeals to everyone and you could find yourself an international celebrity.

The most popular blogs in the UK tend to be occupational blogs. These are written by people doing the sort of jobs that most of us find fascinating; for example, policemen, ambulance staff and those involved in the legal system. Then there are the political blogs, which often cater to a specific group – that is, they're right-wing or left-wing. And finally there are all those blogs that don't fit into a convenient category but are just so well written or manage to provide just the right sort of information that readers can't stay away from them. We can't cover them all here, but here are 10 that reflect the diversity of British blogs.

Guido Fawkes' blog of plots, rumours and conspiracy

WEB <http://5thnovember.blogspot.com>

A political blog that seems to have the inside track on parliament, written with a chatty aplomb that even makes the Liberal Democrat leadership race seem exciting.



The Law West of Ealing Broadway

WEB <http://thelawwestofealingbroadway.blogspot.com>

A no-holds-barred look at the world of the British magistrate and the idiots – or rather defendants – that go through our justice system.

Neveratoss

WEB www.neveratoss.co.uk/neveratossblog.html

A general-purpose, one-stop shop to waste away a day at the office, this blog is a light-hearted mix of commentary, news and amusing links.

The Policeman's Blog

WEB <http://coppersblog.blogspot.com>

David Copperfield (not his real name) is the lowest of the low – a uniformed police officer. These are the guys who, according to Copperfield, do all the work and get none of the credit. An honest view of criminals and the way Britain runs its police force.

Nee Naw

WEB www.neenaw.co.uk

This is the blog of a dispatcher in the London Ambulance Service's control room. As a chronicle of what people call an ambulance for, it is sobering stuff – headaches, stomach aches, too much alcohol. And some of the calls are heartbreaking. This is not for the faint-hearted.

Random Acts of Reality

WEB <http://randomreality.blogware.com>

Tom Reynolds works as an emergency medical technician for the London Ambulance Service in Newham, a multicultural and mostly working-class area of the city. His entries focus on the callouts he receives, and these can be quite harrowing.

Diamond Geezer

WEB <http://diamondgeezers.blogspot.com>

A diamond geezer is slang for someone who's salt of the earth, a chap who'll sell you a used car and it won't be a lemon. This blog is written by an East Ender with a better sense of humour than Phil Mitchell and a wider vocabulary than Frank Butcher.



Raised by Chaffinches

WEB <http://milkybugs.blogspot.com>

For a surreal look at life, politics and ornithology, this is the blog to visit. The author Birdman says he was "abandoned as a baby by [his] parents and brought up by a lovely chaffinch couple".

MartinStabe.com

WEB <http://martinstabe.com/blog>

Stabe does more than round up political stories. He takes a subject then comments on it, using links to current stories here and in the US. Good for current affairs junkies.

Real E Fun

WEB <http://realefun.blogspot.com>

This blog is written in a narrative style about the life of Zinnia Cyclamen, a non-religious funeral celebrant, and is soon to morph into a blog about writing a novel, according to the blurb on the front page. This is a shame, as it is entertaining and extraordinarily well written. Read the archives now.